

The concept of transitional labour markets: a theoretical and methodological inventory

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The Concept of Transitional Labour Markets A Theoretical and Methodological Inventory

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to critically assess the concept of transitional labour markets (TLM) and its scientific importance. It seeks to provide a stock-taking of the methodological tools and discuss future theoretical and methodological perspectives. Since the TLM concept is by definition interdisciplinary and multi-methodological in nature, we need to ask about the extent to which this kind of openness is appropriate. The methodological review will go beyond the traditional schism of qualitative vs. quantitative research by including additional dimensions such as exploration, causal modelling, and questions regarding research design and data quality. The sources supporting this 'TLM inventory' are the essential publications (books, working papers, and journal articles) of the two major research projects explicitly based on the TLM approach: TRANSLAM and TLM.NET. The paper concludes with a number of suggestions how to enhance the TLM concept in theoretical and methodological terms.

Zusammenfassung

Das Ziel dieses Aufsatzes ist eine kritische Würdigung des Konzeptes der Übergangsarbeitsmärkte und seiner wissenschaftlichen Bedeutung. Er bietet eine Bestandsaufnahme der angewandten Forschungsmethoden und diskutiert zukünftige theoretische und methodologische Perspektiven. Das Konzept der Übergangsarbeitsmärkte hat per Definition einen interdisziplinären und multi-methodischen Charakter, so dass sich die Frage nach dem optimalen Maß dieser Offenheit stellt. Die methodische Bestandsaufnahme geht dabei über das klassische Schisma von qualitativer vs. quantitativer Forschung hinaus und berücksichtigt auch Dimensionen wie z.B. Exploration und Kausalmodelle sowie Fragen des Forschungsdesigns und der Dateneigenschaften. Die Quellen, auf die sich diese „TLM-Bestandsaufnahme“ stützt, sind die wichtigsten Publikationen (Monographien, Arbeitspapiere und wissenschaftliche Artikel) der beiden Hauptforschungsprojekte – TRANSLAM und TLM.NET – die explizit auf dem TLM-Konzept beruhen. Das Papier schließt mit einer Reihe von Anregungen, wie dieses Konzept in theoretischer wie auch methodischer Hinsicht weiterentwickelt werden sollte.

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1. Introduction

The concept of transitional labour markets (TLMs) serves as the theoretical background for taking a policy-oriented view on labour markets (cf. Schmid 1998; Schmid 2002; Schmid and Schömann 2004; Schmid 2006; Schmid 2008). Given an increasing demand for flexibility and the need to preserve social security in times when traditional full-employment is no longer feasible, this concept encourages policy-makers to address labour market transitions through institutional regulations and policies that safeguard and motivate both employers and employees. Such institutions are called ‘transitional labour markets’ and are located at critical stages of the life course such as the transition from education to employment, from homemaking to employment, or from part-time to full-time employment. To ascertain how TLMs need to be configured, it is essential to know the empirical shape of these transitions and the effects of institutional frameworks on individual transitions. In modern societies, the variety of possible employment pathways is increasing along with the possibility of making “wrong” decisions that lead into dead-end streets. At the same time, the whole process of labour market transitions is becoming more complex, and often more than one single choice may account for failure.

In order to achieve these goals, the TLM concept takes a holistic perspective, i.e. it does not only use a target-oriented instead of a programme-oriented approach (cf. Schmid et al. 1996), but also focuses on both the individual and the institutional level. Using this concept, researchers can

- analyse individual labour market transitions empirically,
- investigate their institutional determinants, and
- develop policies in order to enhance transitions.

This paper aims at summarising the studies that emerged from two large-scale research projects, namely TRANSLAM and TLM.NET, both of which were inspired by the TLM approach. It will not present an overview of the content or research field of these papers¹, however, but rather discuss shortcomings and promising perspectives in order to identify research gaps and future research potential. This review is based on the book series that emerged from the TRANSLAM project and consists of 66 articles (chapters)², and on the working paper series from the TLM.NET project, which includes 32 papers.³

The inventory of the TLM approach shall be made in terms of theories and methods. The theoretical inventory distinguishes between external and internal

1 This has already been done by Recio and de Bruijn (2006).

2 Cf. O'Reilly et al. (2000); de Koning and Mosley (2001); Schmid and Gazier (2002); Schömann and O'Connell (2002); Neugart and Schömann (2002); O'Reilly (2003).

3 The TLM.NET working papers can be downloaded from <http://www.siswo.uva.nl/tlm/>. A couple of them have been published in edited volumes, see e.g., Anxo et al. (2007), Lassinigg et al. (2007), Muffels (2008).

theoretical developments, while the methodological part is structured by levels of analysis, i.e. the individual, policy programme, and institutions. An overview of policy recommendations is not included here.⁴

The paper starts with a brief overview of the TLM concept itself and its evolution, illustrated by comparing the two large-scale projects mentioned above (section 2). The achievements and shortcomings of the analysis of individual transitions will be assessed in section 3, whereas the analysis of institutional and policy effects is the subject of section 4. With its longitudinal perspective and its focus on the institutional effects on individual transitions, the TLM approach bears some resemblances with life-course analysis, which marks a relatively new development. Section 5 provides a discussion of why this trend should be strengthened in the future. Finally, the tools necessary for further developing the TLM approach are mentioned in section 6.

4 An extensive overview of policy recommendations can be found in de Gier and van den Berg (2005) as well as in Schmid (2008: 281ff.).

2. The Concept of Transitional Labour Markets

The concept of transitional labour markets has mainly been developed since the early 1990s by G. Schmid at the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB). The objective was to create a comprehensive framework for labour market analysis based on normative foundations and empirical findings in order to promote coordinated efforts of labour market reform. Most of the research was conducted within two large-scale European research projects, namely "Social Integration by Transitional Labour Markets (TRANSLAM)" – from 1996 to 1998 – and "Managing Social Risks through Transitional Labour Markets (TLM.NET)" – from 2003 to 2007. Their main publications provide a useful and comprehensive outline of the main research findings within the TLM concept. Hence, they are reviewed here in terms of their content in order to identify trends of TLM's scientific development. The characteristics under consideration are theoretical (or conceptual) developments, methodological developments, empirical analyses, comparative designs, qualitative methods, quantitative methods, descriptive methods, explorative methods, and hypothesis-testing models.

Table 1: Characteristics of TLM studies

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>TRANSLAM</i>	<i>TLM.NET</i>	<i>Total</i>
Theoretical/conceptual development	19,7%	34,4%	24,5%
Methodological development	6,1%	0,0%	4,1%
Empirical analysis	72,7%	68,8%	71,4%
Comparative design	30,3%	28,1%	29,6%
Qualitative study	34,8%	34,4%	34,7%
Quantitative study	59,1%	34,4%	51,0%
Exploration	4,5%	12,5%	7,1%
Description	36,4%	31,3%	34,7%
Hypothesis-testing	39,4%	21,9%	33,7%
No. of articles/papers	66	32	98

Source: author's compilation

As we can see in Table 1, there are some remarkable differences between the two projects regarding the content of their respective publications. In TLM.NET, theoretical reflection and development was clearly more strongly represented than in TRANSLAM, whereas methodological concerns were less pronounced. Given the increasing speed of methodological development, this indicates some small disparity between the theoretical and methodological development of the TLM concept.⁵ Em-

5 The last significant discussion of methodology for analysing transitions was published in the *Handbook of Labour Market Policy and Evaluation* (Schmid et al. 1996) and was more or less limited to evaluation methodology. On the one hand, this is a result of the methodological openness of the TLM concept. On the other hand, however, to the concept

pirical designs remain a shared feature of both projects and, therefore, can be seen as a characteristic feature of the TLM concept. The proportion of comparative analyses does not change very much either, but we might ask whether their share is appropriate since the TLM concept aims at providing a framework for comparative research, after all. In the TRANSLAM project, there were more quantitative than qualitative studies, whereas in the main publications of the TLM.NET project, this relation was even, which is probably related to the increasing share of explorative studies. Studies that were purely descriptive (without hypothesis-testing parts) play an important role, even if their proportion decreased in the TLM.NET project. Surprisingly, the number of hypothesis-testing research papers decreased significantly in the TLM.NET project. This is difficult to interpret, given the overall trend towards applying quantitative, hypothesis-testing research methods.

At this point, we may only speculate about the reasons for this development – or the drift towards theoretical issues – over time. The reasons are to be found more in the nature of the projects themselves than in external factors. Although both research projects were as interdisciplinary as the TLM approach itself, there were certain differences regarding the academic disciplines involved (see Figure 1).⁶ Whereas the TRANSLAM project was mainly conceived by economic and sociological research institutions, the TLM.NET project involved more political scientists, who rarely employ hypothesis-testing methods and tend to prefer theoretical approaches. Additionally, the different disposition of the two projects possibly plays a role: TRANSLAM was intended as a pure research project, whereas TLM.NET was funded as a ‘thematic network’ featuring a strong emphasis on policy development and dissemination. The two projects’ diverging intentions or objectives seem to have impacted the development of the TLM approach.

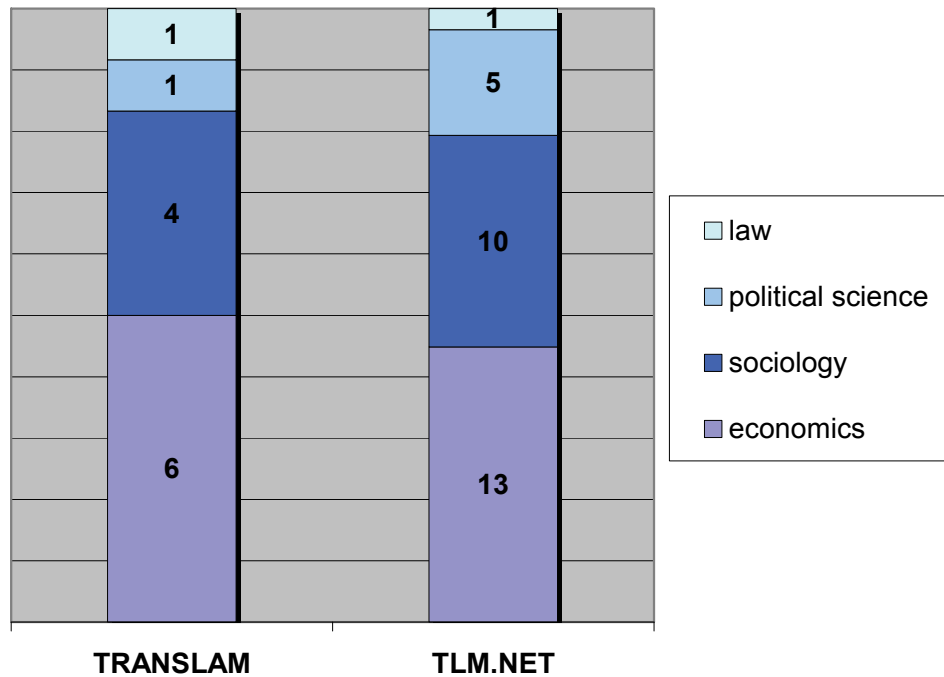
The TLM approach has a strong emphasis on international comparisons. It is interesting, therefore, to also look at the countries examined in the two projects. Table 2 shows how often specific countries were examined in the publications considered. The first important observation is that the TLM concept essentially concentrates on Western Europe, or in other words, on the European Union. The United States, Japan, or Canada – the only non-European countries under observation – only play a marginal role in both projects. The same is true for Eastern European countries, of which only Hungary was considered in a single paper.⁷ Despite the limited availability of data in Eastern European countries, this offers a lot of potential

might benefit from developing a kind of common set of methods in order to support further development of transition research.

6 It is hard to determine the professions of all researchers engaged within both projects. Therefore, the academic disciplines of the participating departments and their responsible researchers were counted.

7 In both projects, East Germany is rarely addressed as a separate entity. Depending on the availability of data, Germany was either analysed as a whole (e.g. Detzel and Rubery 2002; Kruppe 2002; Muffels 2005) or only West Germany was considered (e.g. Bothfeld and O’Reilly 2000). A distinct analysis of West and East Germany remained the exception (e.g. Schömann and Becker 2002).

Figure 1: Academic disciplines of participating researchers



Source: author's compilation

for future TLM research. Since Eastern European countries have a short (labour) market tradition compared to Western European countries, they are characterised by different labour market institutions and different individual transition histories. Additionally, each Eastern European country followed its own strategy when adopting a capitalist market economy. As a result, typologies and theories developed on the basis of Western European countries are challenged fundamentally.

The second observation is that the number of countries examined in a single publication increased from 2.27 to 3.76 on average. Given the stable share of comparative studies (see Table 1), this means that these comparative studies increased the number of countries studied, which is certainly a desirable development. The third observation is that the degree of concentration regarding the countries is decreasing. In the TRANSLAM project, research was concentrated on four countries (Germany, the Netherlands, France, and the United Kingdom), whereas in TLM.NET, the circle of frequently observed countries was expanded by including additional countries such as Denmark and Belgium.⁸ A possible interpretation and summary of these findings is that the focus has been expanded in the second project, but still remains within the Western European sphere.

⁸ The cumulative percentages are not shown here because the order of countries differs between the two projects.

Table 2: Countries considered in TLM projects (number of times mentioned)

<i>Country</i>	<i>TRANSLAM</i>	<i>TLM.NET</i>	<i>Total</i>
Netherlands	14	9	23
Germany	16	6	22
France	15	7	22
UK	14	5	19
Ireland	12	4	16
Spain	10	6	16
Denmark	4	8	12
Sweden	9	2	11
Belgium	1	7	8
Austria	4	4	8
Italy	2	5	7
Portugal	2	4	6
Finland	1	4	5
Greece	1	4	5
USA	2	1	3
Luxembourg	1	2	3
Japan	2	0	2
Hungary	0	1	1
Canada	1	0	1
Σ	111	79	

Source: author's compilation

3. Analysing Transitions

For every concept that aims to give policy recommendations, identifying the as-is state of the units of analysis is essential. The TLM concept is focused not only on the investigation of institutions or policies, but also on the empirical examination of individual transitions. The term ‘transition’ implies the use of longitudinal data: We need at least two statuses within an individual labour market career to define the transition, i.e. the status change. Furthermore, the increasing complexity of life courses also makes transitions more complex and interconnected in themselves.

The majority of quantitative studies within the TLM approach that address transitions at the micro-level use labour market statuses as their essential characteristic. The central shortcoming of most of these studies is that they only consider one single transition between labour market statuses (or on two time points, one initial and one destination point), while neglecting the long-term character of the basic concept of ‘transition’.

In his important contribution to the analysis of individual transitions, Kruppe (2002) argues that transitions are more than just one initial and one final status. Unfolding comprehensive transition matrices, he extends the analysis of transitions by pointing out the importance not only of transitions between employment and unemployment, but also between other labour market statuses such as inactivity, education, and retirement. Using data from the European Community Household Panel (ECHP), he finds that only 29 per cent of all transitions are moves between employment and unemployment. Kruppe’s work constitutes an important step towards a comprehensive empirical analysis of complex transition processes. However, his definition of transition remains limited to the two different statuses at $t-1$ and t , i.e. limited to a single change in labour market status. Another important contribution to the empirical analysis of transitions came from Muffels and Wilthagen (2002). They also used data from the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) and examined transitions between different statuses within different employment regimes and, therefore, related macro-level (institutional) conditions to micro-level (individual) outcomes, i.e. transitions on the labour market. Both Kruppe and Muffels/Wilthagen, however, define transitions simply as a change in status.

This limited operationalisation of transitions has certain effects on the theoretical dimension of transitions. The question “What is the difference between a transition process and a status change (event)?” remains unanswered and undiscussed. The same is true for the “upper boundary” of transitions: What is captured by the definition of “transition”, and when does a transition become a “life-course”?

The explorative dimension of transition analysis remains somewhat underdeveloped, because most studies are limited to descriptive, bivariate cross-tabulation of individual transition – i.e. status change – frequencies. Studies using exploratory methods for constructing transition types remain the exception, despite the fact that further developments of sequence analysis methods, multidimensional scaling, and cluster analysis have enhanced our ability to include more than one status

change (e.g. Brzinsky-Fay 2007). In order to facilitate mutual learning effects between method development, empirical analysis, and theoretical discussion, it seems helpful to refer to life-course research, where the concepts of 'trajectory', 'transition', and 'sequence' are theoretically distinguished in a plausible manner (cf. Sackmann and Wogens 2003). Operationalisations of empirical transition analyses should be based on an appropriate, theoretically derived definition of the transition concept: transitions need to be distinguished explicitly from the narrower 'status change' concept and from the broader 'life-course' concept.

Another shortcoming is that empirical transition studies lack a common normative dimension. In their analysis of transitions between different working time arrangements, O'Reilly et al. (2000) distinguished between these three key types of (working time) transitions. While concentrating on part-time employment and subsequent labour market prospects, it becomes obvious that the effects of the same transition differ considerably between different groups. For example, part-time employment has an integrating character for those who start from inactivity because their income and work experience increase, along with their likelihood of gaining stable employment. Adult employees who face the danger of unemployment, in contrast, tend to see part-time work as a step backwards in terms of career development and earnings compared to their previous position. If accompanied by professional training, however, the transition from full-time employment to part-time employment becomes maintaining, since reasonable training tends to increase employment chances. For young labour market entrants, part-time employment can only have an integrating quality if it's combined with education, e.g. in the form of an apprenticeship. If not combined with training, part-time employment also becomes a maintenance transition because labour market entrants start from a lower income level. Exclusionary transitions, the third (working time) transition type defined by O'Reilly, describes the most risky transitions that come along with a loss of income and career prospects. This kind of transition is likely to be experienced not only by people with low levels of education and skills, but also by individuals who interrupt their employment because of childcare responsibilities, for example. As a result, O'Reilly has shown that any taxonomy of transitions has to take into account not only the various kinds of labour market statuses, but also the characteristics of the individuals who undertake these transitions.

Although O'Reilly's typology is derived empirically with a focus on working time, it may be applied to other labour market transitions.⁹ For example, transitions into and out of temporary employment gain increasing attention in labour market research in general, and should be investigated more from a TLM perspective. Only a few publications are mainly concerned with the question of whether temporary employment serves as a 'bridge' or 'trap', and if so, for which groups (e.g. Cebrián et al. 2003; Hernanz et al. 2005). Conceptually, the normative definition of transitions should be generalised by, for instance, including important dimensions be-

9 For an application to school-to-work transitions, see Brzinsky-Fay (2008).

sides labour market status, e.g. income changes, sustainability of qualifications, and characteristics of the individuals taking these transitions.

Apart from conceptualising the transitions themselves, a number of studies also made an effort to conceptualise transition risks (Schmid and Schömann 2004). Distinguishing between 'risk' and 'opportunity' – with the former carrying a negative connotation and the latter a positive one, while both may be described more objectively by the term 'probability' – is only possible if transitions can be classified into 'favourable' and 'unfavourable', which implies a normative dimension.¹⁰ However, emphasising both the risk dimension and a normative definition of what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' transitions calls for the consideration of different levels that influence the transition probabilities, i.e. the individual and institutional level as described by Muffels (2005) in the agenda for a work package of the TLM.NET project. According to Gazier (2002), labour market efficiency can be improved by adjusting one or more of the following three parameters: prices (wages), quantities (persons employed and/or hours worked), and quality (skill matching, job characteristics). These parameters are seen as interrelated or complementary. At the same time, labour market segmentation processes should be avoided in order to reduce inequality. At the policy level, Gazier defines 'good' TLMs as those policy measures that enhance both labour market efficiency and equity among the labour force.

Summarising the research efforts with respect to the empirical analysis of transitions and transition risks, it is fair to state that there has been remarkable progress from the first TLM project (TRANSLAM) to the second (TLM.NET). There still is a lot of promising potential for the future, however. At this point, limitations in empirical and conceptual analyses of transitions may certainly be explained by data limitations. Additionally, it is hard to compare the empirical approach, i.e. exploring and classifying individual transitions, and the normative approach, i.e. qualifying transitions and TLMs as 'good' or 'bad'. One could compare the policy recommendations of the respective approaches, but practically, these approaches are not sufficiently integrated. Upcoming research activities in this field have to combine normative and empirical approaches in order to improve the consistency of the TLM concept.

10 Because the TLM approach features a strong emphasis on policy development, this normative dimension is justified. The objective is to establish policies that are able to manage the risks of transitions and that are negotiated by the persons or bodies involved (mostly social partners).

4. Analysing Policies and Institutions

Based on the analysis of individual transitions, their risk dimension, their normative features, and the recommendation of TLM policies, the TLM approach also seeks to evaluate these policies. A comparatively early conceptual development concerns the structured procedure for performing a scientific evaluation of active labour market policy (ALMP). The foundations for this policy orientation were created in the *Handbook of Labour Market Policy and Evaluation* (Schmid et al. 1996). An analytical evaluation framework that takes into account the basic implications of the TLM approach (e.g. aggregate focus, comparative approach) was developed by Schmid, Schömann et al. (1997). Systematically, it comprises all of the important dimensions that have to be considered with ALMP evaluation: context analysis, problem analysis, monitoring, and impact analysis. This effort, a very important one in my opinion, has received too little attention within the international academic community, however.¹¹

The consideration of complex policy processes has found its methodological equivalent in aggregate impact analysis and process evaluation (de Koning and Mosley 2001). Micro-level evaluations – the conventional method of active labour market programme evaluations – usually investigate programme effects on participating individuals, but rarely consider the aggregate impact, i.e. effects on the general economy or on the policy implementation process. Because individual and aggregate effects can be different, aggregate impact analysis aims at avoiding these shortcomings. Furthermore, given that the effects of active labour market policies depend on their implementation, the analysis must focus on the whole policy process. Both strategies involve qualitative and quantitative methodologies. One major shortcoming of all the applications of aggregated impact analysis and process evaluations is the fact that countries are always analysed separately. In other words, both tools lack a real comparative approach, which significantly limits their explanatory power. This is mainly caused by the complexity of national institutions and regulations, but reliable comparative analysis nonetheless needs an appropriate comparative toolbox to start with.

In contrast to the neglected exploratory analysis of transitions mentioned above, a number of studies develop typologies of active labour market policies (O'Connell and McGinnity 2002; Larsen 2005) in order to assess their combined effectiveness or to classify countries according to particular policy mixes. However, even these studies fail to examine TLM stability by distinguishing between long-term institutions and short-term policy programmes. Additionally, the increasing quantity of micro-evaluations of active labour market policies creates a need for meta-analyses that comprehensively review and summarise their results. The TLM

11 The main reason might be that it was only published as a discussion paper in German. Additionally, the evaluation of labour market policy programmes has become dominated by economists, who tend to ignore political science studies.

approach requires a comparative examination that takes into account institutional differences. Recently, there have been a few attempts towards this direction (de Koning and Peers 2007; Card et al. 2009). One major difficulty here is the high degree of specificity of ALMP programmes, which constrains their comparability. De Koning (de Koning 2007: 24) distinguishes six types of ALMP instruments: information instruments/mediation, job counselling, sanctions/bonuses, training, placement/wage subsidies, and job creation schemes. In order to assess the effects of employment regime features on ALMP programmes and their effects, more efforts in this respect are necessary.

5. TLM and the Life-Course Perspective

The broad range and conceptual openness of the TLM concept allows for linking it to a couple of theoretical approaches from many disciplines, mainly economics, sociology, and political science. This is why it may be characterized as a meta-theory, even if it is mostly referred to as a ‘concept’ rather than a ‘theory’. The characterisation of the TLM approach as both an analytical and a normative concept made these dynamic influences possible and fruitful for further development of the TLM concept itself. However, it also runs the risk of being only an eclectic accumulation of different studies. Hence, it seems appropriate to explore the theoretical core of the TLM concept.

The TLM concept’s basic idea relies very much on ‘situational analysis’ (Popper 1972; Popper 1994 [1963]). Based on critical rationalism and its falsification principle, situational analysis means the description and explanation of events in consideration of their historical and institutional context using inter alia rational principles.¹² Within this epistemological basis, one of the central theories that play an important role across most of the studies using a TLM approach is human capital theory (Becker 1962; Becker 1975). Since continuing education and life-long learning gain in importance in industrialised economies, transitions between the education system and the labour market obviously constitute a main focus of the TLM concept.¹³ Protecting and increasing individuals’ and societies’ human capital is the main objective in nearly every transition, not only in those between the education system and the labour market. Transitions from employment into retirement, for example, are only reasonable if the (tacit) knowledge of older people can at least be replaced by other workers’ knowledge or transferred to younger workers. Similarly, policies should only encourage those transitions out of the labour market into homemaking and caretaking that do not waste any human capital.¹⁴ The same is true for transitions between different employment contracts or working-time arrangements. In addition, qualifications serve as a kind of insurance against the risk of

12 For a reflection on situational analysis and the rationality principle, see Notturmo (1998).

13 In its original version, (microeconomic) human capital theory is focussed on individual education choices, whereas the TLM concept mainly emphasises education from the viewpoint of ‘public interest’. However, policies recommended by the TLM approach are targeted to reduce income and employment risks that occur when individuals make transitions out of employment into education and, therefore, motivate them to make these transitions.

14 Household and caretaking work is, of course, not a waste of human capital in itself, but interrupting one’s career creates disadvantages and skills mismatches later on, because the paradigm of a continuous career is still standard in most countries.

social exclusion. Hence, a lot of research based on the TLM approach applies human capital theory (cf. Schömann and O'Connell 2002).¹⁵

Apart from human capital theory, which is of major importance in the analysis of labour markets in general, there are a number of other theories that laid the foundations for the TLM approach, including segmentation theory (Edwards et al. 1975), signalling theory (Spence 1973), or insider-outsider-theory (Lindbeck and Snower 1989). All of these theories have in common that they more or less describe labour market and policy failures, which the TLM approach aims to overcome by alleviating labour market transitions.

With its focus on labour market transitions – defined as periods or processes – the TLM concept closely resembles the life course approach (Anxo et al. 2007; Anxo et al. 2007). Life-course theory stands out from among the other theories mentioned above because both approaches complement each other in the sense that the time dimension of the life-course approach provides the sociological basis by examining sequential long-lasting processes containing a couple of single transitions. Additionally, life-course research always looks for the institutional context as one of the major determinants of individual life courses. To this institutional focus, the TLM concept adds the regulatory or policy component by assuming life-courses to be systematically arranged by the individuals themselves and by the policy measures provided. As Schmid states: “[...] the life course is and should be socially constructed and not left to be shaped by economic forces alone” (Schmid 2007: 8).

The life-course concept has a larger scope than the TLM concept, making transitions constituent parts of the life course (Heinz and Marshall 2003). Within life course research, the process of de-standardization remains one of the most important issues (cf. Heinz and Krüger 2001). This process is seen as potentially uncontrolled and a result of individualisation, loosening the power of social ties and norms and globalisation, which both results in increasing demand for flexibility.¹⁶ Empirically, this can be shown by increasingly turbulent vocational careers or family histories showing non-standard transitions and statuses, for example (Berger et al. 1993; Elzinga and Liefbroer 2007; Martin et al. 2008). At the same time, these processes constitute one of the central assumptions of the TLM concept, namely the existence of an increasing number of labour market transitions. Whereas the sociological life-course approach, theoretically, is only focused on the interrelation between the individual and society or between the individual and institutions, the TLM approach additionally emphasizes the political dimension. The increasing probability of transitions creates a couple of risks – e.g. income or employment risks (Schmid 2008: 283f.) – and these need to be minimised. Moreover, the remaining risks should be distributed equally among the actors involved – e.g. employers, em-

15 To a certain extent, the frequent application of human capital theory reflects a kind of ‘academic fashion’ because there are a couple of other theories that could be applied to the analysis of education transitions.

16 It should be mentioned that the process of de-standardisation varies across life domains (work, family, etc.), across countries, across social groups, and across gender (Brückner and Mayer 2005; Elzinga and Liefbroer 2007; Widmer and Ritschard 2009).

ployees, or the government – by developing TLMs. Hence, the sociological life-course approach provides the social basis for the political-science centred TLM concept. Or, in other words, the TLM concept can be seen as the political science complement to the life-course approach.

Furthermore, the life-course approach helps solve another very important problem of the TLM approach by providing the necessary connection between transitions of different kinds. By looking at the entire life course, interrelations and trade-offs between different policy subfields can be identified, e.g. the effects of early retirement on enterprises' further training activities. Embracing this life-course perspective is a major opportunity for future TLM research because their obvious similarities notwithstanding, the TLM concept too often analyses different transitions separately and not in relation to each other.¹⁷ For example, even though the transition into retirement has been analysed extensively (Courtioux 2005; Courtioux et al. 2005; Putman 2005), and even in comparative research designs, it has hardly been studied in relation to the initial vocational education system and the further training system, both of which constitute certain constraints for retirement policies. Exceptions are the transitions between education and employment in terms of life-long learning (Schömann and O'Connell 2002; Lassnigg et al. 2007) and the transition between different working-time arrangements in terms of work-life balance (Anxo et al. 2007). The focus on life-long learning, which is supported politically by the European Commission, also has led TLM research to consider education-employment transitions early as well as later in the life course. The same is true for questions regarding work-life balance.

However, the analysis of interaction effects or – in other words – complex causalities between transitions and transition policies of different kinds remain an underdeveloped field for future TLM research. They are necessary to understand how employment and welfare regimes function, and downright indispensable if the TLM concept aims to make policy recommendations by indentifying best practises to be emulated in other countries. For conducting this kind of analyses, certain methodological innovations are necessary.

17 This is partly reflected by the organisational structure of the TLM.NET project, where work packages were separated by transition.

6. New Methodological Tools

The range of tools used by TLM researchers seems to be quite diverse, including quantitative and qualitative methods applied to both case-studies and comparative designs. Integrated or mixed-method designs, however, have rarely been applied. In other words, researchers conducting micro-level transition analyses are methodologically separated from those analysing institutional or policy effects. While the concentration on the 'risk' dimension of transitions at the micro-level points to probability regression models (e.g. logit or probit models and event history analysis models), the analysis of policies remains limited to the qualitative level of (single) case studies. Both of them are useful in their own right, but the added value of the TLM approach (connecting micro and macro levels) does not seem to be reflected methodologically and, therefore, remains underdeveloped. The case of the probability regression model, which is used extensively in microeconomics, illustrates this problem quite well: Whereas the methodology is highly developed, the level of cognition remains at the individual level, and conclusions regarding the institutional or macro level pretty much remain well-informed considerations. The same is true of event history models.¹⁸

The analysis of institutional regimes is also at the centre of the TLM concept, because the creation and the effectiveness of TLM policies depend on the respective institutional framework. This is why a couple of papers and articles deal with either single-case analyses (e.g. Larsen 2005; van Velzen 2005) or with existing welfare or employment regime typologies (e.g. Muffels 2005), which aim to represent an aggregate and complex set of institutional regulations. Despite its importance within the TLM concept, the analysis of institutional configurations has a great deal of potential for further development with regard to the above-mentioned 'functional equivalents', which emerge from the holistic view on institutions, actors, and labour market processes. Functional equivalents describe the fact that different combinations of different independent variables can have the same effects. This is what Mill (1843) called a "plurality of causes"¹⁹, and it poses a challenge for classical regression analysis, which is mainly based on additive causation. Thus, the analysis of aggregated institutional effects –reflected by the regime approach – could benefit from being refined by examining configurations of institutional components in more detail. From a methodological viewpoint, the application of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (Rihoux and Ragin 2009) seems to be promising and could serve as an exploratory supplement for innovative, quantitative methods. Because the TLM approach focuses on different levels (individuals, institutions), applying appropriate methods, mainly of multilevel regression, is essential.

18 Furthermore, event history models suffer from the limitation regarding the number of events under consideration. If only a single event (transition) is taken into account, they do not reflect enough of the transition's complexity. If more events are included in these models, they become imprecise (Halpin 2003: 7).

19 Further synonyms are "equifinality" or "multiple causation" (cf. King et al. 1994).

In fact, the innovative potential for TLM analyses could only be used if case studies, regime typologies and individual transition analyses, as a first step, were conducted within a common methodological and theoretical framework in order to explore the interrelations between different institutions and policies and their respective outcomes within a certain institutional configuration, i.e. a certain country. This must be accompanied by further steps if we seriously want to establish an integrated approach, a goal inherent to the TLM concept. In order to be applicable to additional cases, the information gained from micro-level transition analyses, single-case studies, and regime typologies must be combined into a comparable analytical framework enabling us to test our hypotheses. Otherwise, the TLM approach's individual dimensions will continue to drift apart.

This procedure calls for appropriate data, which are not available at this time. These data have to meet the following requirements: They must cover a number of Western industrialised countries (ideally including threshold countries), be longitudinal in nature in order to reproduce transitions processes, and should comprise individual information on transitions as well as aggregate information on social and employment institutions and policies. Hence, future research projects based on the TLM approach can only contribute to the further development of the concept if they also involve the collection of appropriate data, either from existing resources or self-conducted surveys.

7. Summary

This paper's objective was to provide a theoretical and methodological stock-taking of the concept of transitional labour markets, accompanied by an illustration of its future potential. At the same time, it meant to show how it stands out from conventional transition or labour market research. The added value of the TLM concept is the comprehensive view it takes of the labour market, involving not only the individual, but also the institutional and policy levels. Additionally, the concept comprises normative aspects of how labour markets should work and empirical analyses of their as-is state in order to develop policy recommendations. Academically, the TLM concept has a comparative focus, while being open to a range of theoretical and methodological influences. This openness constitutes an ongoing challenge in terms of keeping the concept's elasticity at an appropriate level, which requires establishing some synchronicity between theoretical and methodological development. With regard to the main project publications, the major observation was that theoretical or conceptual development has increased at the expense of methodological developments. In order to keep up with the theoretical strength of the TLM concept, a number of potential fields for promising methodological activities were identified.

Transition, the basic unit of analysis, needs to be defined precisely. It needs to be distinguished from status change on the one hand and from the life course (trajectory) concept on the other. This must be accompanied by the development of an appropriate methodological toolbox, which should consist of exploratory and inferential methods. In the same context, generalising and expanding the transition typology to include integrative, maintenance, and exclusionary transitions holds promising potential for future work. Strengthening the comparative character of evaluation methodology remains another field of activity for future developments of the TLM concept. This includes the establishment of a systematic analytical framework for ALMP evaluation, an effort already begun by Schmid et al. (1997). Furthermore, bridging the micro-macro gap remains a problem that has not been solved satisfactorily. Although multilevel analysis becomes more and more fashionable, there is still potential regarding the application of these methods to transition analysis. Additionally, there is a need to identify functional equivalents on both the institutional and the policy level, for which exploratory methods such as QCA could be applied. Finally, there is room for extending the geographical focus of the TLM concept. Other countries are worth to be considered with the help of the TLM concept, not only because the European Union now comprises the countries of Eastern Europe, but also because the world's emerging markets are catching up.

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